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TAGS: KPAO OPRC KMDR OIIP CE LTTE

SUBJECT: MEDIA PLAY: Armitage to Attend Tokyo Conference
on Sri Lanka Reconstruction

¶1. Summary: On 5/23 Washington announced that Deputy Secretary Armitage would attend the Tokyo Conference on

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reconstruction for Sri Lanka. Post issued a similar press release to local media on 5/24. Independent and government-owned television stations heralded Armitage's decision in all languages. English and vernacular coverage of the announcement was heavily covered in Sri Lankan weekend newspapers. One English opposition paper commented on US and international involvement in Tokyo (5/25), "Obviously if the world community did not believe that there was a genuine possibility of working out a durable peace here, they would not be devoting their time, energy and money in backing the effort." End summary.

¶2. Television.

Independent and government-owned television stations heralded Armitage's decision to attend the Tokyo Conference in English, Sinhala and Tamil newscasts (5/24).

¶3. Headlines.

English and vernacular coverage of Armitage's announcement was heavy in Sri Lankan weekend newspapers. Opposition English daily ISLAND scooped on 5/24 with, "US will attend Tokyo conference." Government-owned Sinhala daily DINAMINA, headlined (5/25), "`Japan Aid Conference to be held as scheduled' - American State Department." Government-owned Sinhala weekly SILUMINA reported (5/25), "'Go ahead with Japan Aid Conference'-says America," while state-owned Tamil weekly, THINAKARAN VAARAMANJARI ran a stronger headline (5/25), "`Irreparable loss to Sri Lanka if the Tokyo Conference does not take place' - Richard Armitage."

¶4. Editorial Comment.

On 5/25, under the headline, "The Tigers and Tokyo," opposition English weekly ISLAND SUNDAY commented on U.S. and international involvement in Tokyo: "Obviously if the world community did not believe that there was a genuine possibility of working out a durable peace here, they would not be devoting their time, energy and money in backing the effort." The editor also observed, "If the Tigers really feel for their people, their duty lies in maximizing foreign assistance that can be raised for reconstructing and repairing the war devastation in both the North and the East." Excerpts:

"Whether the news from Washington and Tokyo that the major donor conference to be hosted in mid-June by the Japanese government will be held regardless of LTTE participation will nudge the Tigers to abandon their hard line and attend the meeting remains to be seen. There is no doubt that the absence of the LTTE from this meeting, showcased to both Sri Lanka and the world as an event where the pledging of some serious money is assured, will rob the event of some of its glamour. But it is not going to scuttle it altogether as the LTTE, now playing a dangerous game of brinkmanship, seems to expect. This became unmistakably clear on Friday.

"The Tigers understand international pressure very well. That, together with the war weariness of the people they claim to represent, is what encouraged them in the first place to sign the cease-fire agreement and sit at the negotiating table with Colombo's representatives.

"The U.S. State Department said on Friday that Deputy Secretary Armitage was attending the Tokyo meeting. In

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language that was clearly unambiguous, the State Department's spokesman repeated the dates - June 9 and 10 - and the venue adding that Armitage looked forward to discussing reconstruction and rehabilitation assistance to Sri Lanka at the conference. The high ranking official was quoted saying that this event was important for the

international community, enabling it to "demonstrate its solid support for the peace process and its full commitment to contribute to the reconstruction and development of all regions of the country, including the North and East, which have been devastated by nearly 20 years of conflict."

"Washington intends to back up its statement with letters to some 60 countries about the importance of the Tokyo meeting and the need for their attendance and support.

Obviously if the world community did not believe that there was a genuine possibility of working out a durable peace here, they would not be devoting their time, energy and money in backing the effort. That is why the LTTE, seeking to extract the last ounce of possible advantage for itself, has adopted its present strategy. Given the ease with which it extracted other concessions like having Colombo lift its proscription on the Tigers and the softening of their stance by some countries where the LTTE is outlawed, Prabhakaran and Balasingham may well have believed that there is more to get. The run-up to Tokyo was obviously the best time to grab what they can and that's the way the game is now being played. The interim administration for the northeast dominated by themselves is clearly the immediate objective.

"The people of Sri Lanka have already enjoyed some benefits of peace in the fifteen months since the gun went silent. But the economic dividends have been slow in coming. Colombo has built up massive expectations that this would change post-Tokyo and the signals from abroad tended to support that view. Apart from the U.S. position that the Tokyo meeting must be held as scheduled, "notwithstanding the LTTE's stated position not to participate," the arrest in Thailand of some Tiger arms smugglers and the whip cracking by the Thai prime minister that followed must also send a message to the Tiger hierarchy that they are now sailing very close to the wind.

"Now that it's clear that the Tokyo meeting will be held, with or without the LTTE, they must also remember that pledges can also get diverted for flood relief in the south if they are absent from that forum when how the funds pledged will be utilized. Undoubtedly, flood relief too is badly needed but rebuilding the infrastructure in the northeast will still command greater donor focus if the case is properly presented. If the Tigers really feel for their people, their duty lies in maximizing foreign assistance that can be raised for reconstructing and repairing the war devastation in both the North and the East. Losing out there by default will be criminal folly."

Wills